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“Feelin’ the Bern” or Nixon Redux

Montana Public Radio Commentary by Evan Barrett
April 26, 2016

I respect all who are “feelin’ the Bern.” Bernie Sanders has best articulated the challenges of the economically repressed American middle-class, helping many, including Hillary Clinton, find our voices about how badly the economic playing field is tilted to the advantage of the uber-rich and giant corporations and needs to be changed.

So, thanks, Bernie. We need to hear your message through the June 7th Montana primary all the way to the National Convention, where Democrats will need to pull together to protect progressive gains of the past and advance needed changes in the future. Post-convention unity is essential for the November election.

The historical lessons about unity are instructive, including those lessons I learned directly back in 1968.

As this nominating process plays out, I fear where Democrats might be headed. The circumstances in 2016 seem hauntingly familiar – similar to the 1968 disunity debacle that gave us Richard Nixon. Those “feelin’ the Bern” in 2016 remind me of myself in 1968, when I was strongly for Senator Eugene McCarthy, driven by my antiwar concerns as America sunk deeper into the Vietnam quagmire, and clearly at odds with the Democratic establishment. I was UM campus co-coordinator for McCarthy, felt proud and very pure about my early support for McCarthy and stuck with him through the National Convention in Chicago.

In 1968, when the Democratic Convention nominated Hubert Humphrey, I was deeply disappointed. As an anti-war Democrat, could I, in good conscience, support Humphrey in the fall? I thought about remaining “pure” by not voting for Humphrey or anyone, or by casting a symbolic vote for some fringe candidate.

But the Republican Party nominated Richard Nixon and the presidential election became a choice between two men with radically different views on how the government and the presidency could impact the lives of everyday American citizens.

After a few weeks I came to grips with the reality of the situation and I supported and voted for Humphrey. I tried to persuade my fellow McCarthy supporters that we should unify behind Humphrey against Nixon, as Nixon’s election would be bad for everything we believed in. But hundreds of thousands of them – maybe more – sat out election-day and McCarthy himself did not endorse Humphrey until a week before the election and then only tepidly.

Nixon narrowly defeated Humphrey in the popular vote by just 512,000 votes nationwide – 7/10ths of one percent. And the loss of California, Ohio, Illinois and New Jersey, all of which were strong McCarthy states, helped give Nixon the Electoral College nod. Richard Nixon then took America in directions we regret to this day.

So, in 2016, those “feelin’ the Bern” may face the same choice that McCarthy supporters like me had in 1968 – unity or defeat. The same applies to Hillary Clinton supporters should Senator Sanders secure the Democratic nod. Regardless of whether Hillary or Bernie is nominated, supporters of neither of them should “sit it out.” America would be radically different under a Democratic president (and better, I premise) than what I see in Donald Trump’s America, or under any of the current Republican candidates.

Elections are choices and election results matter for a long time. If for no other reason than the future of the Supreme Court for the next 30 years, Bernie and Hillary supporters need to unite for the good of America. Otherwise, too much “feelin’ the Bern” or “Still for Hill” could lead to Nixon redux in the form of Donald Trump – with the nation heading the wrong direction for a long time to come.

This is Evan Barrett in Butte wondering if 2016 will mirror 1968 Democratic disunity or whether Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton can get it together for the good of America.

Evan Barrett of Butte, has spent the last 46 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.